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House Farm Bill Proposal Good Starting Point for Conservation Debate, Group Says

Coalition applauds Chairman's support for programs that benefit fish and wildlife

WASHINGTON – A broad coalition of hunting, fishing and conservation organizations that works to shape agricultural and natural resources policy today welcomed many of the conservation provisions included in a Farm Bill proposal advanced by Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson.

“The proposal shows that the Chairman clearly understands two things, the importance of the Farm Bill’s Conservation Title to America’s fish and wildlife, and the importance of fish and wildlife to America’s citizen-conservationists,” said Dave Nomsen of Pheasants Forever.

Nomsen, a co-chair of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership’s Agriculture and Wildlife Working Group, was joined by other members of the group in extending praise for the measure. Barton James of Ducks Unlimited, also a co-chair of the working group, pointed to the chairman’s show of support for two existing Farm Bill conservation programs that are uncomfortably close to losing both their funding and their futures, the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) and the Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP).

“WRP and GRP help habitats that harbor healthy waterfowl populations,” James said. “To act decisively to improve their conservation is to do the right thing for the future of the resource.”

Chairman Peterson’s proposal also makes positive statements about the future of the largest Farm Bill conservation program, the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). It also makes strategic improvements to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), specifically those to advance water quality and forest management. “There’s well-placed attention on some known-successful programs in the chairman’s proposal, but there’s some forward-thinking new programs in there, too,” said Jen Mock Schaeffer of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the final co-chair of the working group.

“If you’re a bobolink or budget hawk, you should like the Sodsaver concept,” Mock Schaeffer said. “And Open Fields, which will expand recreational opportunities for the general public, can begin to give back some of what sprawl has taken from us.”

Sodsaver should make non-cropland that is converted to cropland ineligible to receive any federal benefits, such as price and income support payments, crop insurance and disaster payments. “The Sodsaver proposal before the committee will remove some taxpayer-provided incentives for destroying prairie,” said Brad Redlin of the Izaak Walton League of America, “but it should further clarify that *no* form of federal payment continues to serve as a reward for habitat destruction.”

The Open Fields provision included in Chairman Peterson’s proposal would help fund state-managed, voluntary sportsmen’s access initiatives, often called “walk-in” programs. Funding of \$20 million per year, as proposed by the Chairman, would simultaneously enhance wildlife management and improve recreational opportunities on land enrolled in walk-in programs. State-levels programs of this type have been proven to slow the decline in hunter and angler numbers that follows from declining opportunities to hunt and fish being suffered by the general public.

“Walk-in programs are great not just because they provide for improved public access to private lands,” said Nomsen, “but also because in most cases they require that those lands be managed to optimize their value to fish and wildlife.”

“Given the tight budget climate, we are pleased to see many of our conservation priorities in the starting draft of the House 2007 Farm Bill,” said George Cooper, President and CEO of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership. “The progress made and the attention paid to the Conservation Title in the last few months has been very encouraging and is a credit to the members of the Agriculture Committee and their staff -- and to Committee Chairman Peterson and his staff in particular. We look forward to working with them and others in House leadership to secure additional funds so that all our priorities can be realized – including increased funding levels for the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), as well as WRP, GRP and CSP.”

For more information on our work to shape the conservation programs in the next Farm Bill, please [click here](#).

Inspired by the legacy of Theodore Roosevelt, the TRCP is a coalition of organizations and grassroots partners working together to preserve the traditions of hunting and fishing.